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Jarred Johnson

Western Kentucky University, jarred.johnson211@topper.wku.edu

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THE LANGUAGE OF FASHION:
COMMUNICATION, CONCEPTUAL CLOTHING, AND THE RUNWAY
PERFORMANCE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By:

Jarred Johnson

Western Kentucky University
2016

CE/T Committee:

Dr. Elizabeth Alsop

Professor Walker Rutledge

Dr. Elizabeth Gish

Approved by

Advisor
Department of English

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long neglected the study of fashion as anything other than a socioeconomic and cultural phenomena that reflects the more substantial political and historical zeitgeist of a time period. This study takes up Gilles Lipovetsky's plea for a "theoretical facelift" of the study of fashion. Using an original theoretical framework that delineates the communicative structures of fashion as fabric, drape, and accessory, this work analyzes the conceptual meaning of runway performances by designers Alexander McQueen and Marc Jacobs. Though conceptual fashion shows are often described as spectacles intended to stir up a label's recognition and ultimately bolster sales, the author argues that the conceptual runway performance elements of time, title, marketing, location, set, soundtrack, and model appearance and behavior are used by designers to clarify and support the meaning their clothing communicates. Until now, in fashion reviews and retrospectives, conceptual fashion has only been described as "conceptual" and "experimental," and no attention has been given to analyzing the specific concepts the clothing communicates nor how it does so. This study seeks to provide a framework with which to elucidate a language for fashion.

Keywords: conceptual fashion, fashion communication, runway performance, the language of fashion, Alexander McQueen, Marc Jacobs

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VITA

November 22, 1993..... Born- Somerset, Kentucky

Valedictorian, Somerset Christian School, 2012..... Somerset, Kentucky

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English with a concentration in literature

Second Major: German

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PREFACE

When I was a sophomore in high school I found an 80s, neon, button-up shirt in my dad's closet. I had never seen him wear it—not in photos or in person. Like a Kandinsky painting, the shirt was covered with geometric patterns and twirling lines. It had black-and-white fish sketched and textured like Ed Hardy tattoos amidst streaks of bright green, electric orange, yellow and purple. I wore the shirt at least once a week. I thought it was fun and funny, and it helped me stand out in Somerset, my conservative hometown in Eastern Kentucky.

One night, shortly after I began wearing it, Mom approached me stern-faced and said we had to talk. She sat me down in the living room and told me she didn't want me wearing that shirt anymore. She said that I was at a "critical point in my life" and that she was afraid I was "going down the wrong path."

I remember those words largely because my friends and I have made fun of that conversation ever since. I found it completely absurd that my mother would equate a button-down shirt with my entire life trajectory. What my mother recognized then, however, was something I did not: clothing speaks. It is not merely adornment, but an active signifier of information. For my mother, that eccentric fish shirt was a symbol of my indecision and abnormality. Though frightening to admit, in some ways, that shirt actually did represent those things. All clothing does.

Understanding precisely how clothing communicates was what motivated me to conduct this study. The first time I encountered high-fashion clothing was in Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" video. She wore the sequined dress and the "armadillo heels" that defined Alexander McQueen's

Spring/Summer 2010 collection, “Plato’s Atlantis” (Fig. 0.1 & 0.2). I was obsessed, and I sought out everything about the designer that I could find. I was young and interested in both creative writing and pop culture (hence my status as a Little Monster). The first time I had seen narrative, concepts, and meaning in an object of visual pop culture was when I viewed McQueen’s designs

In my high-school English classes and again during my studies as an undergraduate I was trained to analyze and critique literary texts, but I wanted to apply this same type of analysis to the conceptual fashion shows of major designers.



0.1, McQueen Spring 2010,
www.bryanboy.com.



0.2, Still from Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” Music
Video, dearauntiesocial.wordpress.com

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE OBJECT OF STUDY

“Fashion is a language that creates itself in clothes to interpret reality.”

-Karl Lagerfeld, Creative Director Chanel

Fashion, as anything other than a socioeconomic force, remains a neglected topic among scholars. The earliest scholars to study signification and fashion interpreted clothing for its ability to signify socioeconomic status. Thorstein Veblen was one of the earliest and most influential scholars of fashion studies. His 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class* framed fashion as a force that divided social classes. The book described Veblen’s “trickle-down” theory of the fashion system in which trends were adopted by upper-class individuals and then “trickled down” to lower classes.¹ Georg Simmel extended Veblen’s theory in 1904 when he argued that such emulation of upper-class trends by lower-class citizens was an attempt to achieve upward socioeconomic mobility.²

The primary limitation of these theories, nevertheless, is that they allow lower-class consumers no agency. For Veblen and Simmel these low-class consumers are passive users who ascribe no meaning of their own to the objects they purchase, but simply consume them because those in the classes above them did. In this way, fashion becomes a costume that allows individuals to assume false appearances rather than craft genuine identities for themselves. Fashion’s perceived

¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994).

² Georg Simmel, “Fashion,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 6 (1957), 541-558.

ability to mask reality thus lends itself to the belief that it is untrustworthy, even as an object of scholarship. This very reputation is largely responsible for fashion's academic and public perception having changed little since the 19th century.

To recognize fashion as a signifier not just of class, but of other kinds of information—a language capable of communicating conceptual meaning—one must first acknowledge its intellectual history: a history which begins with thinkers like Veblen, Simmel, and even Karl Marx, who similarly reduced clothing to a signifier of socioeconomic status. This history haunts fashion much like Marx's specter, causing many commentators to, as Gilles Lipovetsky suggests, confuse fashion's origin for its function.³ Though fashion was originally interpreted as a divider of social classes, this sole analysis impedes scholars from recognizing the wholeness of fashion's communicative ability. Fashion does signify socioeconomic status, but that is not *all* that it signifies, and interpreting it merely in these terms risks turning fashion into an inert, pre-constructed object, which at best merely reflects the culture and time period of which it is a part, rather than a force that might actively shape culture.

Like many scholars in fashion studies today, Lipovetsky argues for a “theoretical facelift” in which fashion will be recognized as a powerful artistic form capable of communicating a variety of information about its wearers, their cultures and historical moments—one not merely reflecting the zeitgeist, but interacting with it, shaping it, and at times transcending it.⁴ This work takes up Lipovetsky's plea and is a contribution to fashion's growing recognition as an artistic genre and vehicle of meaning.

Conceptual vs Commercial Fashion

In his formative work *Fashion Theory*, Malcolm Barnard defines *fashion* as “modern, western, meaningful and communicative bodily adornments or dress.”⁵ Though the theories I

³ Gilles Lipovetsky, “*The Empire of Fashion: Introduction,*” in *Fashion Theory*, ed. Malcolm Barnard (New York: Routledge, 2007): 25-38.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 4.

advance are applicable to fashion as broadly conceived by Barnard, my study will focus in particular on conceptual, high-fashion examples of “modern, western, meaningful dress.” As the name implies, conceptual clothing differs from commercial high-fashion clothing in that the concept takes precedence over the clothing’s marketability. Because fashion is the visual art form most closely associated with capitalism—consider its role in inaugurating the industrial revolution, its reputation for labor exploitation, and the incredibly short time clothing moves from fashionable to obsolescent—only a small percentage of all clothing, even all high-fashion clothing, is conceptual.⁶

The distinction between conceptual fashion and commercial fashion is typically made obvious in the runway performance. Commercial fashion is most commonly presented on a white, well-lit runway on which the models walk to the end, pose, and return backstage (1.1). The soundtrack tends to be either house or indie music and nearly always has a steady beat to which the models walk.⁷ In commercial fashion shows, the models’ hair, makeup, and accessories are designed to make them look beautiful and similar, and when the shows don’t follow this formula, the surprises are typically a marketing ploy. For instance, *Chanel* has become known in recent years for the spectacle of its fashion shows. Creative Director Karl Lagerfeld had a Chanel Airlines terminal built for his Spring 2016 collection, even though the clothing had no discernible conceptual connection to this set. A mass-market example of the same thing is Victoria’s Secret’s annually televised fashion show. The celebrity models, musical performances, and theatrics are periphery to the commercial meaning of the garments. Whereas conceptual designers might orchestrate their shows to include a critique of the fashion industry, refer to historical events, or convey a unified theme, a runway show like Victoria’s Secret’s primarily communicates messages about beauty standards, wealth, status, and celebrity culture.

⁶ Bonnie English, *A cultural history of fashion in the 20th and 21st centuries: from catwalk to sidewalk* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁷ Lauren Valenti, “The Ten Coolest Songs We Heard on the NYFW Runways,” *marieclaire.com*, last modified Jan. 5, 2016.



1.1, “Jill Sanders Spring 2011 Show,” harpersbazaar.com

By contrast, a conceptual fashion show—as the name implies—presents a unified concept from the venue and runway to the music, props, and accessories, to model appearance and behavior, and, ultimately, the clothing itself. In this way, the runway becomes the set for a performance much like a play or work of performance art, and the elements that constitute that performance are specifically used to elucidate the clothing’s meaning, as created or molded by a label’s designer. The incipient difference, then, between commercial fashion and its conceptual counterpart is what each is communicating: while commercial fashion generally communicates culturally established views of status, gender, and sexuality, among other things, conceptual fashion has the capacity to communicate more idiosyncratic ideas, critiques, and “concepts,” which originate with, or, more accurately, are directed through, the designer.

Transportation Theory vs Semiology

Before examining exactly which concepts fashion is capable of communicating, one must understand *how* it communicates. Essentially two schools of thought exist about the communication of meaning. One theory, though outdated in communication studies, holds that meaning is transported from a sender to a receiver, while another argues that meaning is created through subjective interpretation based on one’s culture and position within that culture. The former, transportation theory, was developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1949 to describe telecommunication, or communication through radio and telephone technologies. The authors

describe a six-part system whereby information is moved from a source, through a transmitter, noise, signal, and receiver until reaching its destination.⁸ In the scholarship of fashion studies, this theory is highly unpopular, largely stemming from fashion studies' difficulty identifying which constituents of the fashion system correspond to the theory's classifications. For example, the designer could be either the "information source" or the "transmitter"; the "receiver" of the message could be the purchaser of clothing, the spectator seeing it worn, or both. Moreover, an accurate view of the fashion cycle shows that the purchaser of clothing motivates fashion's production, and thus, determines the content of the "message" in the first place. After all, fashion designers are always attempting to predict the trends their consumers will purchase. In this way, the cycle bends back on itself, and, in the language of transportation theory, the receiver of the information affects the message itself, informing what the sender communicates.

The problem with fashion studies' critique of transportation theory is that it negates the entire concept of information moving from a source to a receiver simply because the fashion system cannot recognize its representative parts within the theory's model. A more productive critique of transportation theory would seek to redefine the theory's structure and nomenclature rather than deny its plausibility. In particular, a restructuring of the transportation theory of communication as relevant to fashion might recuperate the role of the designer in transmitting meaning. Because fashion is predominantly studied by cultural theorists, scholarship on fashion's meaning tends to erase designers and the meaning they imbue in clothing. Fashion studies' tendency to erase the designer aligns with post-structuralist tendencies in literary interpretation, which trace their origins to Roland Barthes' theories from his 1964 essay "Death of the Author." Here Barthes argues that authors do not determine the meaning of the texts they compose; the interpretation of those texts should proceed independently of an author's intentions.⁹ This approach has defined fashion studies

⁸ Warren Weaver and Claude Elwood Shannon, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Champaign, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1963).

⁹ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," from *Image / Music / Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-7.

until the present, and, consequently, scholarship on fashion has focused on how meaning is attributed to clothing by culture. Furthermore, because of this cultural focus, the discipline of fashion studies has largely focused on everyday clothing rather than high fashion, and when high fashion has been studied, as with Veblen and Simmel, it has only been discussed from the economic vantage of establishing trends which everyday fashion replicates till obsolescence.

The other school of thought, semiology, differs from the transportation theory of communication by denying a linear flow of information from sender to receiver. Semiology holds that a sign's meaning is constructed and communicated culturally through its relation to other signs, implying that meaning is not content expressed and received, but is the unstable effect of constant negotiation.¹⁰ Individuals are made members of their respective cultures through social interaction, and the way objects communicate to those individuals is directly related to the culture of which they are a part. (So, for instance, meaning is communicated through feelings and associations that are products of someone's location within or outside of a culture.) The negotiation of meaning as discussed in semiology is the negotiation between a people's values and beliefs, which have been imparted to them through culture, and the item presented to them. The male full-frontal nudity of the Rick Owens Spring 2015 collection generates offense and astonishment, for example, because of the Judeo-Christian views of morality which inform Western thought. In a more general example, wearing clothing with the Confederate flag on it would mean something different in Alabama than it would either in Maine or Zimbabwe. In fashion studies, semiology has stood as the foil to transportation theory, and many leading scholars, such as Thorstein Veblen, Malcolm Barnard, Elizabeth Wilson, and Caroline Evans, have deemed culturally negotiated meaning the accurate model of fashion communication, as though the transportation model could not *also* be applicable. The truth of fashion is that it communicates both ways, particularly in the artistic tradition of conceptual high fashion.

¹⁰ Paul Bouissiac, *An Encyclopedia of Semiotics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

The Structures of Fashion Communication

To elucidate how fashion communicates, I must first name the structures—the *language*—it uses. Just as written and verbal languages are composed of structures called words that make up clauses and ultimately sentences, fashion also communicates by assembling parts. Fashion communicates through the elements of fabric, drape, and accessory. The meaning of these elements is supported and made clearer through the contextual and paratextual elements of the runway performance: time, location, marketing, title, set, soundtrack, and model appearance and behavior.

Fabric encompasses the textural composition of the materials used to create the garment—for instance, satin, velvet, canvas, or cotton—as well as the visual composition of these materials—thin, thick, sheer, opaque, etc. These qualities allow different fabrics to communicate specific meaning semantically. For instance, for its smooth texture and shimmer satin has historically been associated with romance, and cotton, as evidenced in the former slogan of “fabric of our lives,” has been associated with everyday use, comfort, and leisure.

An additional way that fabric communicates, and one used by designers more often than texture to convey meaning, is through color and pattern. Colors such as white, red, and black signify particular meaning in Western culture, as most viewers know. Furthermore, patterns and designs can signify specific meaning—particularly cultural meaning. Certain geometric patterns, typically called “Aztec patterns” because of their association with the Aztec empire, are quite popular today and have appeared in mass-market collections from Urban Outfitters, Zara, Target, and JC Penny. In an example from high fashion, Givenchy’s Autumn/Winter 2015 collection was labeled “Persian-carpet inspired” because of the patterns and color scheme designer Riccardo Tisci chose.¹¹ Alexander McQueen’s Autumn/Winter 1995 show “Highland Rape” communicated conceptual meaning through use of argyle and tartan, which are associated with Scottish highlands clans. Common examples of designs signifying specific meanings include national flags, animal or floral

¹¹ Hannah Tindle, “Inside Givenchy’s new menswear pied-à-terre in Paris,” *GQ Style Magazine* April 2015.

prints, cartoon characters, logos, words, or allusions to art history (for instance, Uniqlo's use of Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Michel Basquiat designs).

The *drape* of clothing refers to the way fabric is sewn and how it lies on the body. Drape may be described in terms of textural composition such as ruffled, stiff, or softly folded. Though seemingly paradoxical, drape can also be described in terms of a lack of drape, as is the case with rips, cuts, and tears. The deconstruction movement in high fashion, which was propelled by Maison Margiela and the Antwerp Six in the early 1980s, used torn clothing to critique the fashion industry.¹² Because Margiela's Spring 1997 collection featured clothing made of the numbered and lettered tan linen of dressmaker dummies printed with the words "semi-couture," these garments erased the magical seamless products of high fashion and reminded viewers of the hands and forms from which the designs originated (1.2). Additionally, drape can be described in historical and cultural terms such as Edwardian, Victorian, or Oriental, and designers might use such historical references to draw analogies between past and present.¹³



1.2, Maison Margiela Spring 1997, *The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) Online Collections*

Finally, clothing can communicate specific meaning through the accessories that adorn the fabric and complement the drape. Such accessories might be part of the fabric—as with pockets, collars, hoods, seams, belt loops, and fringe—or added onto the fabric as with buttons, straps,

¹² Caroline Leaper, "Who's Who: Maison Margiela," vogue.co.uk, last modified Oct. 15, 2012.

¹³ Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 2.

zippers, belts, or patches. One example of an accessory communicating conceptual meaning is the hoods, which style.com labeled as both “ominous” and a reference to the Little Red Riding Hood fairytale, that some models in Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer 2015 collection wore (1.3).¹⁴ Another would be the cargo pockets and large, gold buttons of Marc Jacobs Spring/Summer collection of the same year, which many interpreted as references to military uniforms (1.4).¹⁵



1.3, “Look 12,”
Comme des Garçons
S/S 2015, style.com



1.4, “Look 7,” Marc
Jacobs S/S 2015,
style.com

Though fashion is, as scholar Fred Davis describes, an “ambiguous communication system” with “low semanticity,” not all areas of the fashion system communicate so ambiguously.¹⁶ As the above examples demonstrate, a common way clothing accomplishes clear recognition for viewers is by mobilizing unambiguous signifiers such as icons, uniforms, and “costumes,” which assemble fabric, drape, and accessory in a way that is easily recognizable, using a pre-established code to communicate meaning to viewers. Since viewers can only interpret clothing visually, the primary way they make associations, and, therefore, find meaning, is through visual signifiers they recognize. Marc Jacobs’ Spring/Summer 2015 collection, for instance, referenced military uniforms by using khaki and forest green, cargo pockets, and large, gold buttons. Therefore, because viewers picked up on his referents, Jacobs’ collection is described in fashion reviews as

¹⁴ Jo-Ann Furniss, “Spring 2015 Ready-to-Wear Comme des Garçons,” style.com, Sept. 27, 2014, accessed Jan. 9, 2016.

¹⁵ Nicole Phelps, “Spring 2015 Ready-to-Wear Marc Jacobs,” style.com, Sept. 11, 2014, accessed Jan. 11, 2016.

¹⁶ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 148.

“militant,” “inspired by military garb,” and “army ready.”¹⁷ The same can be said of collections that reference Native American tribal clothing or Japanese kimonos, school-girl uniforms, business attire, Barbie, or athletics.

The Runway Performance

Despite having elucidated textual structures through which clothing can communicate, in most cases, as Davis says, clothing’s language is still ambiguous. For designers to convey the concepts they wish to, they often use conceptual runway performances to support or clarify the meaning of the clothing they design.

In his 1987 work *Paratext: Thresholds of Interpretation*, literary theorist Gerard Genette outlines his concept of paratext, or text outside the main text an author writes.¹⁸ For Genette, paratext encompasses primarily text supplied by editors, publishers, and printers—for example, the cover art, foreword, footnotes, colophon, etc. According to my analyses of conceptual fashion, the paratextual, or para-clothing elements (seeing as clothing is our text here), are similarly “thresholds for interpretation” that make the meaning the designer has imbued into the clothing more discernible. These paratextual elements include a runway performance’s time, location, marketing, title, set, soundtrack, and model appearance and behavior.

Time refers to the historical time period during which a runway performance takes place, including current events, politics, pop culture references, and trends and innovations within the fashion industry or other creative industries. For example, Moschino’s creative director Jeremy Scott is notorious for creating collections based on commercial and popular culture trends. His Autumn/Winter 2014 collection included Spongebob Squarepants designs, and the yellow arches of the Moschino *M* were clear references to the McDonald’s logo. In an example many would

¹⁷ Nicole Phelps, “Spring 2015 Ready-to-Wear Marc Jacobs.”

¹⁸ Gerard Genette, *Paratext: Thresholds of Interpretation*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

consider more serious, Kanye West's Yeezy Season 2 collection for Spring/Summer 2016 consisted of clothing in plain shades of nude, brown, and black on models whose skin nearly matched each shade (1.5). Because of the prevalence of unwarranted police brutality against African Americans in the United States and the media attention given to these events, the black models' stepping forward lifelessly at the end conveyed West's political message clearly and connected the clothing to the events to which West's collection was responding.



1.5, "Kanye West debuts Yeezy Season 2 at NYFW," freshnessmag.com

In some cases a show's marketing contributes a great deal of information regarding the concepts of the show. The invitation to the fashion show is often significant, for example. The invitation to Dries Van Noten's Spring/Summer 2015 collection was a small, clear, Perspex box with bright-green moss inside, which one reviewer called "a trace of the organic world nestling inside the confines of something industrially produced" (1.6).¹⁹ Though patrons receiving the invite may have initially been confused, things would have become much clearer when they entered the Grand Palais' Port A for the show and found a rug that resembled green lichens and grasses woven by Argentinian artist Alexandra Kehayoglou covering the entire runway (1.7). As this example demonstrates, anticipation can be greatly heightened through conceptual invitations. Before showgoers even arrive at the venue, they are attempting to discern the meaning of the show by considering its invitation and the other marketing they have encountered.

¹⁹ Mark Holgate, "Dries Van Noten Spring 2015 RTW," vogue.com, Sept. 24, 2014, accessed Jan. 2, 2016.



1.6, “Dries Van Noten Invite,” lachicnomade.com



1.7, “58,” Spring 2015 RTW Dries Van Noten, vogue.com

Not all fashion shows are given specific titles, but when they are these titles typically contain significance for the meaning the designer wishes to convey. Alexander McQueen, a notoriously conceptual designer, titled all of his shows. From “Highland Rape” to “Dante” to “In Memory of Elizabeth Howe, Salem, 1692,” it is clear McQueen’s titles were meant to convey specific concepts. Show-goers and reviewers then used these titles to make sense of the collection, as the titles often summarized the designer’s concepts and helped viewers understand the performance’s referents.

The *location* of a fashion show refers to its venue, while its *set* refers to the decoration of that venue, whether the runway itself or the arrangement of show-goers’ chairs inside. The earlier example of the moss-rug at Dries Van Noten is an example of a conceptual set, as is Chanel’s Autumn/Winter 2015 collection, which recreated a grocery store in Paris’s Grand Palais. A conceptual *location* would be VETEMENTS Spring/Summer 2016 collection, which was shown in a “tacky Chinese restaurant,” or Pierre Cardin’s Spring/Summer 2008 show, which took place in the desert of Mingsha Mountain in northwest China.²⁰

The auditory elements of a fashion show are another way designers signify concepts for viewers. Often this is a music soundtrack, which may either be chosen for aesthetic value, to

²⁰ Susie Bubble, “VETEMENTS bring fashion week to a tacky Chinese restaurant,” dazeddigital.com, Oct. 30, 2015.

establish a mood, or to convey specific messages. An example of a meaningful, conceptual soundtrack would be Givenchy's Spring/Summer 2016 collection, which featured hymns and prayers from six different religions, thus clarifying the performance's theme of solidarity and peace.²¹ In other cases, music is less important, but other auditory elements are used to convey meaning. In Marc Jacobs' Spring/Summer 2015 collection, for instance, patrons were asked to put on Beats by Dr. Dre headphones upon entering, and during the show a computerized voice foretold the models' every move.

Finally, as the earlier example from Yeezy Season 2 demonstrated, the way models appear and behave can also be used to convey meaning. The makeup and hair with which models are styled often complements and heightens or, at other times, ironically contrasts, the ideas imbued in the clothing. Even which models are cast for the show can influence the meaning conveyed. Factors considered in casting might include height, weight, skin color, attitude, and whether the model has dyed or traditional hair, curls or tattoos, etc. Kanye West could not have conveyed his political message without models of color, for example. Similarly, VETEMENTS, as a brand identified with underground subcultures, would not want to cast classically beautiful models. Instead, some of their models had bleached hair, bowl cuts, and dark circles and bags under their eyes. The recent global development to cast men in womenswear shows and vice versa is also interesting and meaningful for designers like Hedi Slimane at Yves Saint Laurent, Proenza Schouler, Jeremy Scott at Moschino, and Patrick Robinson at Emporio Armani.

Model behavior refers to the way a model acts when walking the runway. Alexander McQueen's "Highland Rape" featured many models stumbling down the runway and attempting to cover their exposed bodies. Instead of having traditional tall, skinny models walk a runway, Rick Owens' Autumn/Winter 2014 show featured a step show by primarily full-figured black women.

²¹ Alexandra Ilyashov and Connie Wang, "Everything You Need to Know About Givenchy's 9/11 Ode to America," *refinery29.com*, Sept. 11, 2015.

The lifeless way Kanye West's black models walked forward during his Yeezy Season 2 runway performance made the connection between his clothing and police brutality possible.

In addition to being a canvas that can be altered to convey specific meaning and directed to act a certain way, the model provides clothing the ability to convey the fullness of its meaning by merely embodying the clothing. Clothes are designed for the body, and even without the body, "hanging on rails or cast to the floor," as Malcolm Barnard proposes, "clothes suggest the living, moving bodies they might once have inhabited."²² In the runway performance, the model's body provides clothing the fullness and movement it needs to convey meaning, yet the clothing does the same for the body, creating it, insofar as it is a cultured body, and providing the body with meaning.

Thus, the runway performance conveys meaning much like performance art in which the artist's medium is their body, and the actions they perform constitute the work of art. The body is ultimately the form for which all clothing is designed and to which clothing refers. Accordingly, conceptual clothing cannot be wholly interpreted without its bodily foundation. In other words, Alexander McQueen's clothing cannot fully communicate its meaning on mannequins in a Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition or on hangers. The connection between the role of the body in performance art and fashion is likely why performance artists are called on so often to collaborate with designers on their runway shows. Givenchy's Riccardo Tisci collaborated with famed performance artist Marina Abramovic on his Spring/Summer 2016 collection, Eckhaus Latta worked with artist Bjarne Melgaard, and Kanye West solicited the help of performance artist Vanessa Beecroft. Such partnerships reflect the central role of the performer, as well as the designer, in delivering meaning through clothing and the runway performance.

My Theoretical Vantage

To reiterate, for the above elements of clothing to communicate meaning beyond the wearer's sociocultural or economic status or identity, they must be imbued with concepts by the

²² Barnard, *Fashion Theory*, 12.

designer and must work in harmony with each other to transport meaning to viewers. The theoretical framework with which I will interpret conceptual high fashion both recognizes that viewers of fashion interpret clothing from their cultural vantages and that designers of fashion imbue clothing with meaning by arranging and combining culturally recognizable visual signifiers. Thus, conceptual fashion uses both transportation theory and semiotics, as messages which rely on cultural understanding are transported from designers to their audiences.

What I will do in the subsequent two chapters is show this somewhat abstract theory of fashion communication in practice by analyzing two conceptual runway performances—first a performance from the late designer Lee Alexander McQueen, who was widely recognized as a conceptual designer, then from Marc Jacobs, a designer working today who is largely understood as a commercial, wearable designer, as well as one influenced by McQueen. The analyses will consider the designers, their biographies, time periods, and contemporary cultures. Of course, the analyses will interpret the meaning and importance of the runway elements of time, marketing, location, set, soundtrack, model appearance and behavior in supporting and conveying the meaning of the clothing. The ultimate purpose of these analyses will be to analyze the conceptual meaning communicated by the clothing itself, which will be interpreted using fabric, drape, and accessory as the three structural components that work together to create a language for fashion. Using this framework, I will elucidate the meaning of the succession of clothed bodies on the runway as a full and unified narrative capable of communicating a concept as directly as a work of visual art, a novel, opera, or symphony.

CHAPTER 2
ANALYSIS OF ALEXANDER MCQUEEN'S "HIGHLAND RAPE,"
AUTUMN/WINTER 1995

McQueen and the History of Conceptual High Fashion

To recognize McQueen's conceptual innovations in the fashion industry, one must first identify the designer's antecedents and situate him within the larger history of conceptual high fashion. This history begins with the English-born designer Charles-Frederic Worth, who institutionalized the concept of haute couture or high fashion in 1857 in France.²³ By creating a fashion house or label which produced work by him as an individual designer, Worth conceived the modern fashion industry. It wasn't until the 20th century that high fashion adopted the organized fashion shows and related fashion seasons that typify the system today. Thus, as presented in "fashion shows," or on the bodies of models in Parisian salons, high fashion, according to social philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, became "an enterprise involving not only creativity but also advertising spectacles."²⁴

By the 1920s, design houses with recognizable names today like Dior, Chanel, Lanvin, and Saint Laurent were becoming famous for their clothing.²⁵ These designs were mostly beautifully draped and structured pieces that signified wealth, luxury, and status, and at best directly referenced

²³ Jessa Krick, "Charles Frederick Worth (1825–1895) and The House of Worth," metmuseum.org, last modified Jan. 6, 2016.

²⁴ Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

outwardly only foreign cultures through articles like harem pants, turbans, and kimonos. This mainstream high fashion persisted in the fashion industry with little dispute until the 1970s.

Conceptual fashion, a particular kind of high fashion distinguishable from mainstream high fashion, can trace its roots to the Japanese avant-gardist designers of the late 70s, namely Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto. Inspired by their training as artists and responding to the artistic zeitgeist of the 60s and 70s which favored concepts over representation, these designers infused the modernist ideologies of Japan's 1960 consumer-technological boom into clothing: using fiber technology and geometric forms, for instance, as well as trading the form-fitting western look for sculptural designs.²⁶ A similar approach was taken by a group of Belgian designers referred to as the Antwerp Six, who, along with their Belgian contemporary Martin Margiela in the 1980s, similarly melded Eastern and Western fashion designs and blurred the distinctions of gendered clothing.²⁷ The Japanese avant-gardists and the Belgian designers were radical in their focus on the structural elements of dress instead of the clothing's marketability. In recent fashion reviews on websites like style.com and Women's Wear Daily and even in some reviews of the 70s and 80s, these designers have been called deconstructive designers, a term referencing their tendency to create clothing that reveals its own construction, albeit through exposed seams and zippers, dangling flaps of fabric, or bare templates.²⁸ In this way, by tearing apart clothing and destroying traditional assumptions of fashion, the designs seem to offer a critique of the industry itself. As fashion studies scholar Malcolm Barnard contends, in deconstructive fashion the details of construction and mechanical production are brought to attention, dissolving the aesthetic illusion of wholeness and opulence upon which high fashion thrives.²⁹

²⁶ Elyssa da Cruz, "Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto: Japanese Fashion in the Twentieth Century," metmuseum.com, last modified Jan. 6, 2016.

²⁷ Richard Walker and Steven Dell, "Deconstructing fashion design: integrating theory and practice in design education," From *Social purpose and creativity- integrating learning in the real world: Articles from the Learning and Teaching Conference 2008*, 48-59.

²⁸ Veronique Hyland, "See Little-Seen Looks From Margiela and the Antwerp Six," nymag.com, last modified April 17, 2015.

²⁹ Barnard, *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, 26.

The British designer Alexander McQueen continued the work of the Japanese Avant-gardists and Antwerp Six by testing the limits of clothing's ability to hold and transport meaning. While his conceptual predecessors primarily imbued their designs with critiques of the fashion industry and fashion system, McQueen tended to direct his critiques outward, and used his designs to address issues of nationality, gender, class, race, history and even his own biography. Beginning with his graduate collection from Central Saint Martins in 1992 and ending with his posthumous collection in 2010, McQueen's shows—from his Spring/Summer 1999 show “No. 13” in which two robotic arms painted a model's white dress live on the runway to his Spring/Summer 2005 show “It's Just a Game” in which his models assumed the roles of living chess pieces—consistently worked to offer social, cultural, and political commentary. Unfortunately, many viewers initially decried McQueen's clothing as unwearable spectacles merely designed to stir up controversy and ultimately bolster recognition for the brand.³⁰ Though these shows certainly did draw attention to McQueen and his label, the attention was never solely focused on the controversy or peculiarity of his collections. Instead, this controversy was a gateway for the fashion industry to recognize both the meticulous craft of McQueen's tailoring, drape, and cut and the ingenuity with which he approached design. McQueen's collections have never been analyzed conceptually, and this is a result of both the absent framework with which to interpret conceptual fashion and viewers' having never encountered the idea that clothing could *be* conceptual.

To date, no comprehensive analysis of a McQueen runway performance exists—not in *New York Times* fashion reviews by Suzy Menkes, who often reviewed McQueen, much like style.com author Sarah Mower, nor even in posthumous reflections on his oeuvre by authors like Dana Thomas, Katherine Gleason, or Andrew Bolton. To contribute to the scholarship surrounding McQueen and aid in the burgeoning recognition of the designer as an artist testing the limits of clothing's ability to convey conceptual meaning, I offer an analysis of his Autumn/Winter 1995

³⁰ Katherine Gleason, *Alexander McQueen: Evolution* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2012).

show “Highland Rape.” By deconstructing mainstream traditional British womenswear and seizing ownership of misappropriated Scottish iconography, McQueen used “Highland Rape” to highlight the problems of cultural appropriation, oppression, and identity, and polemicized both the objectification of women and squelching of Scottish culture.

1999: The Highlands Come to London

“Highland Rape” was shown on March 13, 1999, in a tent just outside London’s Natural History Museum in the city’s South Kensington neighborhood. Using the terminology of fashion analysis previously laid out, one can determine the show’s *time* and *location*. Though it was McQueen’s fourth show, it was his first in the British Fashion Council’s official Fashion Week tent and marked his debut as an established designer with a shot at captivating the fashion elite’s attention. “Highland Rape” closed London’s Fashion Week, and this placement, combined with the publicity of a single-sheet invitation with a five-inch scabbing surgical wound and the inclusion of the word “rape,” generated much hype and apprehension.³¹ In this way, even before the runway performance began, McQueen was communicating to viewers and the fashion public through the analytical elements of *marketing* and *title*, directing their thoughts toward potential themes he might address in his designs and show.

According to curated footage posted to YouTube by fashiongirl22, as show-goers took their seats in white folding chairs inside the tent, they found a white runway set strewn with moss, bracken, and heather (2.1).³² The show began with a boom, as blue and white lights flashed behind the show’s flat white backdrop before settling into the purple shade that lasted for the full thirty minutes. The music was club-like with the standard beats of a 90s catwalk anthem, sometimes diverging to sound like rock music. Dispersed within the electronic pulses and heavy bass beats

³¹ Ibid.

³² fashiongirl22, “Alexander McQueen Fall/Winter 1995, “Highland Rape,” Youtube.com, Aug. 6, 2014, accessed Jan. 28, 2016.

were sounds that clearly conjured church bells ringing, explosions, and water dripping. At times during the runway performance, the music mellowed and thunder was heard as the stage lights and cameras flashed.



2.1, “Alexander McQueen’s Controversial ‘Highland Rape’ Show, [video.vogue.com](https://www.vogue.com/video)

The first model walked the length of the runway in a green turtleneck sweater with sleeves that extended beyond her hands and semi-sheer lace pants that covered her shoes, adding length to her long legs. In terms of *model appearance*, her red hair, like that of most of the models, looked teased and bunched like dreadlocks or tree roots and was pinned away from her face, dangling loosely on her back. Her large black contacts and dark winged eyeliner gave her a monstrous, otherworldly presence. As for *behavior*, she walked violently with authority. The clothes on the model following her looked much more finished and standard, the short-sleeved cream blouse with the accessory of large buttons down its front draped in a way that conjured Elizabethan-era clothing, a theme that would develop as the show progressed. Her floral-patterned, A-lined, teal skirt shimmered in the stage light, making her look more like an office assistant than the warrior who preceded her. These first looks were distinctly British womenswear, as the drape and accessories of the clothing referred to Renaissance and Elizabethan-era England. The tension McQueen established in his first two models was continued throughout the show. Interspersed among dark, monstrous and powerfully-adorned women were the simple but coherent looks of contemporary dress clothing (2.2).

As the performance progressed, models whom McQueen adorned appeared in various stages of bruised, battered, and torn dress. Critically, these tears never appeared in the tartan that

adorned fifteen of the designer's models. One model in torn attire wore a light green lace dress, draped with a gaping hole near her crotch, revealing her delicate pink underwear. Others wore what would become McQueen's signature ripped lace, handsewn and cut so the tears avoided the beautifully designed flowers (2.3). This lace exemplified a major theme of McQueen's show: the contrast between innocence and gentleness, on the one hand, as thematicized in lace, floral prints, full-length skirts, waif hair, and timid models, and power and violence, embodied in sharp angles, dark colors, armor, exaggerated winged-liner, and aggressive models.



2.2, "Alexander McQueen, 'Highland Rape, FW95.'" Makingtheunfinished.wordpress.com



2.3, "Alexander McQueen, Dress, 'Highland Rape.'" blog.metmuseum.org

Gender and Power

At its simplest level, "Highland Rape" was a show about femininity. To some of the show's harshest critics, "Highland Rape" objectified women and romanticized sexual assault.³³ McQueen objected to this criticism following the show, saying such accusations "couldn't be further from the truth."³⁴ "If people say I do portray women like that," the designer said, "it's because I want to portray the way society still sees women in many ways, not how I see them."³⁵ Close analysis of the clothing and design elements confirms the designer's statements that this was a show about the objectification of women, not one which perpetuates that objectification.

³³ Jenna Sauers, "'Is He For or Against Women?' Alexander McQueen and the Female Form," jezebel.com, Feb. 10, 2010, accessed Jan. 9, 2016.

³⁴ Tim Blanks, "Alexander McQueen's Controversial 'Highland Rape' Show," thescene.com

³⁵ *Ibid.*

While “Highland Rape” shows some timid and exposed women, their extreme innocence and passivity are used to draw attention to the inaccuracy of such assumptions, and viewers are ultimately left with a recognition of women as powerful agents. Consider, for example, that McQueen clothes a number of his models in armor and military clothing. Even when the models are wearing garments that expose their breasts or gape at some of the most erogenous zones, they are not ashamed to bare their skin. Though appearing battered and frayed, they confidently display themselves. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, “Highland Rape” is a performance referencing the Highland Clearances of the mid-18th century, a powerfully violent and impactful historical event, which the designer chooses to reenact, recast with all females.

Historical Oppression

The frequency of tartan and argyle in “Highland Rape” as well as its titular reference to the Highlands connects McQueen’s show to Scotland (Fig. 2.4 & 2.5). Here, the designer again uses the title to communicate meaning, and for the first time in this analysis, the clothing itself is important, as McQueen uses fabric to semiotically connect his designs to Scotland and the country’s history. To most fully understand the meaning with which McQueen has imbued his clothing, one must understand the historical suppression of Scottish culture.



2.4, “Highland Rape, AW95,”
blog.metmuseum.com



2.5, “Alexander McQueen Autumn/Winter
95,” widowsofculloden.tumblr.com

In particular, the event to which McQueen's show is explicitly and implicitly alluding, as acknowledged and yet still unanalyzed by both the curators of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's retrospective on McQueen and *Fashion at the Edge* author Caroline Evans, is The Jacobite Rising of 1745, likely the most significant moment for Scottish nationalism and cultural identity. The rising was led by Charles II and a group of mostly Catholic Scottish Highlands' clansmen known for their loyalty to King James VII of Scotland, who was the king of Great Britain for three years before being deposed by his Protestant son-in-law William of Orange. Though initially successful, the Jacobites' challenging Protestant British forces culminated in a decisive defeat, the last battle to date on Scottish soil, the Battle of the Culloden.³⁶

Following Scotland's defeat here, the British Parliament sought to squelch Highland culture and the clan system, which they viewed as sources of division, defiant to the king's authority. The 1747 Act of Proscription demanded the disarmament of the Scottish Highlands and criminalized the wearing of traditional Highlands dress. The act prohibited "man or boy, within that part of Great Britain called Scotland" from wearing "the plaid, philibeg, or little kilt, trowse, shoulder belts, or any part whatsoever of what peculiarly belongs to the highland garb."³⁷ The act was successful at stopping the dyeing of tartans and led to the loss of some historical patterns but was not successful at prohibiting Highlands dress. According to some Scottish historians, the Act of Proscription imbued traditional clothing with more profound political and national meaning, ultimately promoting the myths and romanticism associated with it today.³⁸

"Highland Rape" invoked the Highland Clearances and subsequent squelching of Scottish culture through references to Scottish Highlands clothing and Elizabethan and Renaissance-era English clothing. Fifteen of McQueen's 42 models sported argyle and tartan. Additionally, in terms

³⁶ Ray James, *A complete history of the Rebellion: from its first rise, in 1745, to its total suppression at the glorious battle of Culloden*, in April, 1746 (London: The British Library, 2015).

³⁷ "The Act of Proscription," Scottish Tartans Authority, tartansauthority.com.

³⁸ Jonathan Faiers, *Tartan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

of *drape*, the traditional cut of the Prince Charlie Jacket, which dips sharply from the shoulders toward the abdomen before joining together clearly referenced the Highland Clearances through both name and historical significance. Continuing with *drape*, the high ruffled collars of 17th-century English clothing and the chainmail and armor some models wore conjured both England as Scotland's adversary in the Clearances as well as generally referenced war and violence. Importantly, however, McQueen did not simply historicize his clothing, recreating designs from the past. Instead, he mixed historical referents within some designs familiar to his contemporary Western audience, namely female business attire. Thus, the designer accomplished what Jonathan Faiers considers a "grafting" of history into the present:

Many designers who reference history display a form of historical seamlessness in which the past is perfectly and nostalgically recreated in the present. With McQueen, however, the reference is not as comfortable; the suture lines of his much-discussed "surgical" tailoring techniques are still visible as uneasy grafts of history onto contemporary garments.³⁹

In the realm of visual art, German cultural theorist Walter Benjamin argued for the distinction of mere historicism from historical allegory.⁴⁰ The difference between the two, Benjamin contended, was that historical allegory activated the past in the present and made his essay's titular "tiger's leap" between the historical period of the object's references and the time period in which the object was created. What Alexander McQueen did differently than arguably any designer before him was construct a historical allegory through the medium of clothing. In the case of "Highland Rape," McQueen's many aesthetic references served as historical allegories, grafting the 18th century Jacobite Rising and its ensuing Highland Clearances with the appropriation, reduction, and romanticization of Scottish culture in Britain around 1995.

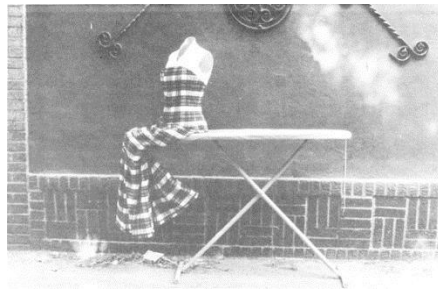
³⁹ Faiers, *Tartan*, 320.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002).

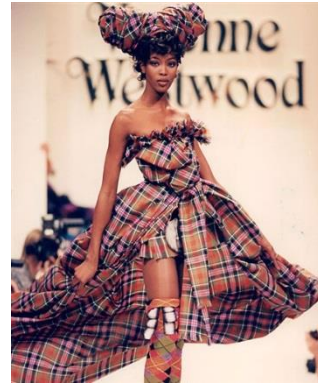
Appropriation of Scottish Culture

By 1990, 243 years after The Act of Proscription, the British and European fashion industries perpetuated the oppression of Scottish culture by dislocating traditional Scottish iconography from its historical origins. A number of Western designers in the early 1990s made frequent use of the motifs of tartan and argyle. American designer Isaac Mizrahi's Fall 1989 collection included a "Stewart Flannel Kilt Gown," both an appropriation of the traditional patterns of the Scottish highlands and cultural style of the kilt (2.6). French designer Christian Lacroix's Autumn/Winter 1991 collection included a tartan ball gown. McQueen's contemporary, British designer Vivian Westwood, included a tartan dress with argyle kilt hose, a sporran belt pouch (a leather or horsehair pouch with tassels that functions as a pocket for the pocket-less kilt), and a number of tartan skirts which soon became a signature for her, in her Autumn/Winter 1994 collection (2.7). Importantly, Westwood was awarded the British Fashion Council's Award for British Womenswear Designer of the Year both in 1990 and '91, the years during which she began appropriating design elements specific to Scottish culture. McQueen's 1995 designs used tartan much differently by deconstructing the colonialist impulses behind appropriation. While Mizrahi, Lacroix, and Westwood were not Scottish designers and did not seem to understand or respect the meaning Scottish people had given to their traditional designs, McQueen's family was Scottish, and the designer researched this history—his own history—thoroughly.⁴¹ Because of this, McQueen's designs were able to deconstruct the mythical Scotland propagated through misappropriation and replace this substance-less, reductionist fantasy with genuine and rooted signification.

⁴¹ Andrew Wilson, *Alexander McQueen: Blood Beneath the Skin* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 20.



2.6, “Stewart Cashmere Flannel Kilt Gown,” bombmagazine.org



2.7, “Vivian Westwood FW 1994,” chaos-mag.com

Certainly McQueen would have understood that in Scotland before the 18th century, tartans were fabrics created regionally across the Highlands with the dyes available in the particular region in which each pattern was created.⁴² Therefore, each pattern represented clanship and a particular regional and ancestral identity. The kilt was a piece of Scottish clothing worn during sporting events and ceremonies, thus constituting status, formality, and heritage.⁴³ By the 20th century, however, these traditional meanings were lost as cheap reproductions circulated outside of Scotland, and tartan, argyle, and kilts became merely representative of Scotland in general, with neither understanding of regional patterns or historical purpose. McQueen’s “Highland Rape” collection called attention to the lost history of the fabrics and garments, thus revealing Britain’s historical oppression of Scottish culture and the continuation of this oppression through misappropriation.

Counter-Appropriation: How McQueen Took Back Ownership of Scottish Iconography

In the realm of literary criticism, deconstruction is the “method of reading and writing” which uncovers “the instabilities of meaning in texts.”⁴⁴ In the context of fashion theory,

⁴² Faiers, *Tartan*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Allison Gill, “Deconstruction Fashion: the Making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembled Clothes,” in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed., Barnard, Malcom (New York: Routledge, 2007).

deconstruction fashion is runway clothing that is “unfinished, coming apart, recycled, transparent, or grunge.”⁴⁵ The term was first applied to the designs of Maison Margiela, whose finished canvas garments with accentuated seams more resembled mannequins on which finished designs were created than finished designs themselves. While Margiela’s designs were readily understood as critiques of the fashion system, or the complex cultural and economic structures surrounding fashion’s creation, dissemination, and obsolescence, Alexander McQueen’s designs have never been analyzed accordingly.⁴⁶ Though McQueen’s deconstructed clothing in “Highland Rape” may seemingly be the result of violence or assault, the tears are symbolically representative of the British fashion industry’s violent attack on genuine Scottish culture. Since McQueen only tore the plain-colored fabrics in Elizabethan drapes, which referred to Britain, it is obvious that the referent of his deconstruction was Britain’s misappropriation of Scottish designs, not the signification of the designs themselves. Through the analytical element of *drape*, “Highland Rape” deconstructed the reductionist myths of Highlands culture.

The importance of McQueen’s deconstruction of misappropriated designs lies in cultural appropriation’s negative implications. Cultural appropriation is particularly problematic because it does not allow the persons to whom the cultural objects belong—the individuals who created the objects and imbued them with culturally specific meaning—the agency to control that meaning, nor even the ownership of or credit for the object. In nearly every scenario, appropriation reveals the power dynamics of a society, whereby a group with more privilege and power, be it racial and/or socioeconomic, appropriates the products of a disadvantaged or marginalized group. Since British culture is by far the dominant culture of the UK, and Britain had historically attempted to squelch Scotland’s distinctions from them, this was the case for the appropriation of tartan, argyle, and kilts in designer fashion in the early 1990s. Alexander McQueen’s “Highland Rape” deconstructs the trend toward appropriation in British fashion by imbuing his personal narrative within the clothing,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

thus re-appropriating what has been falsely appropriated, seizing back the lost agency of the icons' Scottish originators.

Alexander McQueen was certainly aware of the Highland Clearances and the history of Scotland and England. His family hailed from the Isle of Skye in North Scotland, where, according to legend, Charles II was brought to safety following his defeat at Culloden. In fact, when McQueen discovered that his ancestors were Jacobites, he claimed it was a McQueen who rescued Charles II and rowed him to Skye. McQueen often sported Highlands clothing such as the kilt on his runways. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2006 Costume Institute Gala, McQueen arrived in a tartan shawl and Ghillie boots, accompanied by Sarah Jessica Parker whom he dressed similarly (2.8). When being named A Most Excellent Commander of the British Empire by the Queen, McQueen opted to clothe himself politically, wearing a kilt, shawl, Balmoral cap, and Sporrans belt. When asked by his mother what his Scottish ancestry meant to him, McQueen responded "everything."⁴⁷



2.8, "McQueen and Parker, Costume Institute Gala 2006," huffingtonpost.com

This same kind of personal, political clothing was exemplified in "Highland Rape." One of the most striking examples of McQueen's concepts in the runway performance, and a prime illustration of his method of fashion communication is the open, tartan, Elizabethan blouse with green latex bumster trousers that appears 22 minutes into "Highland Rape" (2.9). The drape of the ruff collar referred to 17th century English fashion, the time period when Scottish cultural identity

⁴⁷ Wilson, *Alexander McQueen: Blood Beneath the Skin*, 20.

began to be questioned in favor of assimilation.⁴⁸ The tartan fabric, of course, refers to Scottish identity, but the fabric doesn't rest on the structure of Scottish designs like the kilt. Instead, the tartan decorates Renaissance and Elizabethan British designs. This paradox that McQueen created through grafting Scottish nationalistic fabrics with British drapes leaves the garment unfinished and deconstructed. Unlike the tartan designs of Westwood or Mizrahi, McQueen's designs present no illusion of wholeness and seamlessness. "Highland Rape" suggests Scottish iconography cannot be grafted into the contemporary British fashion industry because of the unrecognized oppressive histories which British misappropriation of these designs perpetuates. The resultant image, a woman carrying herself confidently with the entire mid-range of her body exposed because of a gaping blouse and incredibly low pants, is unsettling, just as the unresolved history of oppression should be.

The role of women in "Highland Rape" is significant when one considers that the Act of Proscription was applicable only to men or boys. In a time period when men held all political power, how a woman dressed was hardly seen as a threat to British national identity. McQueen's women, clothed confidently in tartan, are a threat, however. These women are political actors exposing the gap separating Britain's historic and contemporary oppression of Scotland and the country's culture; the gaping holes in McQueen's fabric weave together past and present into a polemic statement about the continuation of erasure.

⁴⁸ James Robinson Planché, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Historic Costume from the First Century B.C. to C. 1760* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 434.



2.9, Still from “Alexander McQueen Fall/Winter 1995, ‘Highland Rape,’” fashiongirl22, Youtube.com, Aug.6, 2014.

In this way McQueen’s designs remind viewers of the continued history of Britain’s attempts to squelch Scottish culture in an effort to forcibly assimilate Scotland and ensure its citizens’ compliance and subservience. “Highland Rape” was the first time McQueen explicitly dealt with his ancestry in his clothing, though he would revisit the theme in his 2006 show “Widows of Culloden.” Thus, “Highland Rape” was an autobiographical show in which McQueen navigated his ancestry and ultimately his own narrative. As someone of Scottish descent who was aware of the nation’s history and as someone who recognized the fashion industry’s appropriation of his culture, McQueen re-appropriated Scottish iconography with rightful cultural ownership, agency, and rooted signification.

CHAPTER 3

ANALYSIS OF MARC JACOB'S SPRING/SUMMER 2015 COLLECTION

Though McQueen has arguably been the most ambitious conceptual fashion designer to date, his contributions to the fashion industry have served as a platform on which other designers have built. Conceptual fashion is still being created today. Unlike with a great deal of McQueen, Jacobs' fashion is very wearable and commercial, thus proving the "conceptual" can still reside in fashion not explicitly designated that way. Interestingly, though Jacobs' designs are recognized as much more commercial than McQueen's, the two are often compared and written about together, as in Maureen Callahan's 2014 book *Champagne Supernovas*, where she considers McQueen and Jacobs comparatively as the two fashion industry personalities and innovators who defined fashion in the 1990s. Recognizing the speed with which the fashion cycle moves and the growing prowess of fashion within popular culture, I have chosen to analyze a Jacobs show from fashion's most recent season at the time of writing this, spring 2015. Much like McQueen's collection, which critiqued contemporary British culture and its tendency to misappropriate Scottish iconography, Jacobs' collection critiqued contemporary Western culture and its promulgation of violence through technology.

Marc Jacobs Spring/Summer 2015

Marc Jacobs' Spring/Summer 2015 Ready-to-Wear collection, which the designer did not title, was shown in New York on September 11, 2014. The setting was New York's Park Avenue Armory, a former military facility for the Seventh Regiment of New York's National Guard, which

is now a venue for experimental art. Cumulatively, these elements represent the runway performance's *title, time, and location*.

Inside the Armory's open Drill Hall, Jacobs' audience was greeted by a Barbie-pink, idealized, suburban house—the set—seemingly dropped in the middle of the room like Dorothy's house from *The Wizard of Oz* (3.1). Where windows should be, there were opaque pink palettes; where grass should be, pink gravel. As seen in a video posted to YouTube by FatalefashionIII, show-goers took their seats on bleachers coated in shag carpet the same lively pink color where they found Beats by Dr. Dre headphones.⁴⁹ Each audience member was given a pair. "The idea was to put everybody in their own world," Jacobs said backstage, as reported by style.com, "It's what you make of it."⁵⁰ The guests intuitively put the headphones over their ears and were immediately isolated from the other viewers who sat in close proximity. The monochrome scenery was ethereal and overly optimistic, hinting at the contrasting clothed characters who would soon inhabit it.



3.1, Spring 2015 RTW Marc Jacobs, Daniele Oberrauch/Imaxtree, nymag.com, 11 Sept. 2014.

The lights on the audience dimmed and the pink house became more focal as a loud, up-tempo violin piece began in the ears of each show-goer. A bass soon joined, followed shortly by a computerized, masculine voice, which dominated the soundtrack. "A girl in a big dress will enter," the voice said shortly before the model Joan Smalls, labeled one of the 50 highest paid and most

⁴⁹ FatalefashionIII, "Marc Jacobs | Spring Summer 2015 Full Fashion Show | Exclusive," Youtube.com, Sept, 11, 2014, accessed Jan. 8, 2016.

⁵⁰ Phelps, "Spring 2015 Ready-to-Wear Marc Jacobs."

desired female models by models.com, entered the scene, beginning a square trail around the house. Smalls opened the show, and thus the runway performance had begun. She wore a forest-green dress, which, in terms of *drape*, lay loosely on her body and was held together by a belt made of the same green fabric with a subtle gold buckle, which sat high on her waist (3.2). The dress's drape could further be described as a V-neck with pleats and, using the framework of *accessory*, in addition to the belt, had two pockets below the waist-line held shut by large gold buttons. She wore simple brown sandals which fastened across the top of her feet: "stylized Dr. Scholl's," one analysis reads.⁵¹ Smalls looked natural, wearing little makeup and a short, fairly unkempt, black cropped wig with bangs. The next model followed closely behind her, wearing the same dress in a sand-colored green, this one with a boat neck instead of the V. Her wig was the same. They all were. Every model that followed was a derivative of the first, wearing a pant-suit or long coat or poncho or shirt with the same loose, earth-toned, pleated fabric and commanding gold buttons (3.3).



Fig. 3.2 & 3.3, Spring 2015 RTW
Marc Jacobs, Daniele
Oberrauch/Imaxtree, nymag.com,
Sept. 11, 2014.



The narrator continued to direct the show—"a girl in a big dress and boots enters, followed by a girl with gapped teeth and three bags"—as the models strutted a square around the house and exited from where they came. The directing voice didn't describe them exiting, however, but entering the house, turning on the faucet, being bored, chewing gum, making a phone call, jumping

⁵¹ Jessica Michault, "Marc Jacobs Ready To Wear Spring Summer 2015 New York," nowfashion.com, 11 Sept. 2014, Accessed 8 Jan. 2016.

on the bed. Noises in the headphones followed the descriptions: the sound of an opening door, a phone ringing out, bed springs creaking. Certainly this feature distinguished Jacobs' runway performance from McQueen's. While McQueen relied on the title and invitation to relay concepts and Jacobs did not, Marc Jacobs relied more heavily on the soundtrack and model behavior, essentially creating a play with a script and actors—even asking the audience to participate in the performance by putting on headphones.

The model lineup was prestigious. Alongside Joan Smalls, Kendall Jenner walked, as did Karlie Kloss, Adrianna Lima, and Daphne Groeneveld. Notably, in other terms of *model appearance*, Jacobs' cast was fairly diverse by fashion-week standards, eleven of his 56 models being women of color. Each model walked and exited, at which point the show appeared to be over. The narrator's voice then continued as the soundtrack became steadily more natural and ethereal: "I wish I could move somewhere else; I could be happier there." In each set of headphones, birds, crickets, wind, and water could be heard. The models returned in a close line, marching one last square around the house for the show's finale, looking like an army.

The association of marching models and militarism was only possible because Jacobs imbued his clothing semiotically with clear references, much like McQueen's references to Elizabethan and Renaissance designs or the Scottish Highlands, to military clothing. Viewers saw flak, combat jackets, fatigue pants, and backpacks, even earth-toned colors: khaki and camouflage green. In his 1992 work *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, cultural theorist Fred Davis described clothing as an object with "low semanticity," meaning that its constituent elements—namely fabric, drape, and accessory—cannot easily hold and, therefore, transport meaning.⁵² Because clothing's semanticity is lower than another communication vehicle like spoken or written language, its meaning is more elusive, and its interpretations more subjective. There are exceptions to fashion's elusive communicative ability, however, which Davis does not acknowledge. In rare examples,

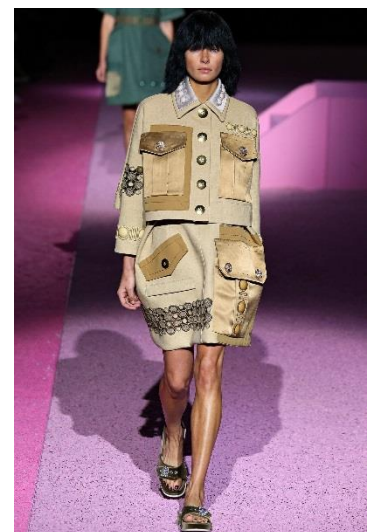
⁵² Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 27.

clothing does have an unambiguous code by which some articles of clothing signify particular meanings within Western culture. The prime example of this is uniforms. In Marc Jacobs' Spring/Summer 2015 collection, Jacobs imbued his pieces with clear references to military clothing, thus opening up his collection's ability to communicate the theme of violence and war.

Importantly, the clothing of Jacobs' collection became consistently less militaristic and more domestic as the clothed narrative collection progressed. *Fabric* was an important communicative element Jacobs utilized, as with McQueen's use of ruffles, lace, tartan, and argyle. In the course of the show, matte fabrics were replaced by satins; in terms of *accessory*, crystals and cabochon stones substituted for stark, commanding gold buttons (3.4 & 3.5). Interestingly, both McQueen's and Jacobs' collections included references to military clothing. McQueen's collection featured both armor and a square-shoulder red petticoat with the same large buttons Jacobs used. Naturally, the difference between the designers' military references is that McQueen's were rooted to a past time period while Jacobs' were more contemporary. Thus, Jacobs did less of Faiers' "grafting" of past and present; the designer was critiquing contemporary society and events while McQueen drew analogies between past and present.



Fig. 4 & 5, Spring 2015 RTW Marc Jacobs, Daniele Oberrauch/Imaxtree, nymag.com, 11 Sept. 2014.



Despite Jacobs' collection utilizing military uniforms, however, the looks were not uniform. In the open drill hall of a former armory building, Jacobs presented a different kind of

drill: one less about conformity and more about rebellion. This has precedence in American history. Vietnam-era protest clothing used military code to critique militaristic action. A photo from an April 1971 march in Washington, D.C., against the Vietnam War shows protestors clad in army green combat jackets and brown boots, fatigue pants, and bonnie hats (3.6). Marc Jacobs named Grace Slick, former singer of Jefferson Airplane, and her protest fatigue pants as one inspiration for his collection.⁵³ By alluding to elements of military clothing code and transporting them outside of their intended context, Vietnam protestors were able to imbue military clothing with a critique of the thing for which the clothing stood.



3.6, Leena Krohn, "Protests against the war in Washington, D.C. on 24 April 1971."

In the case of Marc Jacobs' Spring 2015 collection, the setting was not a march around the United States Capitol Building, but a march around an idyllic, Barbie-pink house. Fred Davis, the cultural theorist who argued fashion has low semanticity, discussed fashion as communicating through "encoded tensions."⁵⁴ Certainly tensions are rife in Jacobs' collection. The tension between the doll-like house and the militantly-clothed women with no makeup and undone hair communicated clearly, using many of the same methods as McQueen's "Highland Rape," what these women were not: passive, reactionary, or merely beautiful. Rather, they were powerful and progressive. Even this, however, was at tension with the mundane tasks the narrative voice described them completing like turning on water, jumping on the bed, and making a phone call. Though the audience had been relegated to a series of individual voyeurs, they still could not see

⁵³ Phelps, "Spring 2015 Ready-to-Wear Marc Jacobs."

⁵⁴ Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*: 29.

these actions. The windows were opaquely pink, and the models never entered the handle-less pink doors of the house. There was tension between what the models were described as doing, what they did, and what the viewers expected them to do. It is in this blank space between contradictions that fashion gains its voice. The juxtaposition of opposing objects in Jacobs' Spring 2015 collection thematicized power, violence, and the dispersal of these things. Jacobs' designs signified these forces—the very forces that the clothing critiqued.

If Jacobs' collection was critiquing militarism, then as with Vietnam-era protest clothing, understanding the historical context of the show—another factor of the communicative element of *time*—is important to understanding the meaning of the clothing's references. As stated, the show took place on September 11, 2014, the thirteenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center Complex, located five miles south of the Park Avenue Armory in which the show took place. Five days prior, Russia's Vladimir Putin settled a negotiation with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, agreeing to a ceasefire which intended to end the five months of fighting between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian Army—fighting which had resulted in the deaths of over 2,500 people.⁵⁵ The night before the show, U.S. President Barack Obama announced a “steady, relentless” campaign to “destroy the militant terrorist group” ISIS, which would include bombing targets in Iraq and Syria, equipping Syrian rebels, and providing humanitarian relief to people displaced because of warfare.⁵⁶ That same day, September 10, 35 protestors were arrested in Ferguson, Missouri, for attempting to stop the flow of traffic on Interstate 70.⁵⁷ The protest was in direct response to the shooting of 18 year-old, black, and unarmed Michael Brown by the white police officer Darren Wilson. All of these events shared violence in common, and publicity, as news stations continually played reels of tear-gassing and gunshots and

⁵⁵ BBC Online, “Ukraine Crisis: Timeline,” Nov. 13, 2014, accessed 9 Jan. 2015.

⁵⁶ Mark Landler, “Obama, in Speech on ISIS, Promises Sustained Effort to Rout Militants,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2014.

⁵⁷ Manny Fernandez, “35 Arrested as Missouri Police Block Protest on Highway Over Teenager's Shooting,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2014.

uniformed fighters amidst scenes of destruction. Television and internet have made the violence more visible and much nearer. Unlike periods in the past, the brutality is not isolated to Crimea, Syria, or Missouri; the violence is transported through carrier waves and electronic signals into every home and family. Dialogue about the nature of these events is discussed around press tables as much as dinner tables.

Whereas McQueen's critique was intentionally focused on a time period in British fashion during which appropriation of Scottish cultural iconography was common, Jacobs could not have predicted his performance's precise timing. The lack of intentionality does not negate the significance of the show's historical context in its interpretation. In other words, as suggested in the introduction, the designer's intentions for a show are not the only factors to consider when interpreting it. These cultural events would have certainly been present in the minds of the show's viewers the night of September 11 and, therefore, should be acknowledged. Though Jacobs would have had to solidify his designs months prior to their showing, he managed to create a collection hauntingly time-appropriate. Marxist historian Eric Hobsbwan said it best in his 1994 work *The Age of Extremes*: "Why brilliant fashion designers, a notoriously nonanalytic breed, sometimes succeed in anticipating the shape of things to come better than professional predictors, remains one of the most obscure questions in history and, for the historian of culture, one of the most central."⁵⁸

Though not immediately relevant to the theme of war and violence, recognizing the time and context of Jacobs' 2015 ready-to-wear collection is again useful when interpreting its use of technology. On September 9, 2014, two days before the show, Apple held a keynote address unveiling the Apple Watch, a move which was widely publicized in fashion media as a giant step in wearable technology.⁵⁹ These technologies have been criticized by many as a leap in the technological attack on the human body. Unlike the pervasive technologies which currently drive

⁵⁸ Eric Hobsbwan, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 160.

⁵⁹ Alain Sherter, "Apple unveils iPhone 6, iPhone 6 Plus, Apple Watch," *CBSNews*, Sept. 9, 2014.

pop culture like the smartphone, laptop, and tablet, wearable technologies are directly attached to the human body. Thus, using the language of German cultural theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, profane, capitalistic technology comes nearer to the sacred space of the individual, and the once-futuristic concepts of human enhancement and automatism become a less distant prospect.⁶⁰

How appropriate, then, that Jacobs' show would begin by asking viewers to put on a set of modern, branded Beats by Dre headphones. Along with being technology that temporarily adorns the body, headphones, more than other technologies, isolate their wearers. American *Vogue*'s European editor-at-large Hamish Bowles described watching "the Marc Jacobs experience, otherwise known as his spring 2015 show" from his own, "little private world."⁶¹ Fashion shows are typically observed collectively by all viewers invited, but in the case of Jacobs' Spring 2015 show, each viewer was alone and left to wonder if everyone else in the room was hearing the same track. Whereas normally audience members might lean to their left and comment to their neighbor on the clothing before them, Jacobs' viewers were allowed no such luxury. If Jacobs' militant clothing encoded his collection with references to war and violence, the headphones he required his collection's viewers to wear signified yet another attack: the attack of technology on our collective experience as humans. The audience was made a voyeur on a disturbing scene in which women dressed ready to kill marched squares around a set in which they could not possibly belong. The models wore no headphones, so the viewer interpreted that they were unaware of the director orchestrating or at least foreknowing their every move. And despite this haunting scene, the viewer could not look away. They were stuck in headphones on a seat on poppy pink bleachers in an armory on New York's Park Avenue. It was the show's coupling of the themes of violence and

⁶⁰ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans. John Cumming (New York: Verso, 1973).

⁶¹ Hamish Bowles, "Marc Jacobs Spring 2015 RTW," *vogue.com*, Sept. 11, 2014, Accessed Jan. 9, 2016.

invasive technology that allowed Jacobs' Spring/Summer 2015 collection to critique the transportation of historical violence through media into daily life.

The entire scene was an allusion that few if any in the audience would recognize. The narrative was taken from a 1976 short film by John Smith titled *The Girl Chewing Gum*.⁶² The film showed a continuous, black-and-white, 12-minute shot of a London intersection. A narrator's voice was dubbed over the noise of the street and served the same function as in Jacobs' soundtrack: he seemingly orchestrated the action. As is the case in Jacobs' show, the narration of events in *The Girl Chewing Gum* gradually became more absurd and fantasized: the narrator directed the clock's longest hand to make one revolution every sixty minutes, he digressed about the demographics of the neighborhood he was in and the sign above the shop window, which he claimed appeared to be written in both English and Greek but was actually only written in English; he concluded by telling viewers that he was shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field fifteen miles away as the sky clouded over. As with Jacobs' narrator's inconsistencies, these absurdities led the viewer to determine the voice must be fictional, though the scene was not. The voice was describing the action, not prescribing it. In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, word was pinned against picture, and chance against order, but in Marc Jacobs' Spring 2015 collection, the narrative voice was more troubling. It did not seemingly orchestrate moving pictures, but the actions of corporeal characters directly before Jacobs' intended audience.

If the collection was, in fact, a critique of technologically-dispersed violence, then the natural sounds which concluded the soundtrack as played through the headphones alluded to an escape from this terrifying world. The track began with syncopated violin strumming, quickly conjuring folk music and its sounds. This folky and classic rural sound existed in tension with the technological voice dubbed over it. At many points in the track, the string sounds stopped, adding tension to the track. The track was repetitive, and many sounds were looped together overlapping,

⁶² Nicole Phelps, "Spring 2015 Ready-to-Wear Marc Jacobs."

creating a sense of unease through gentle cacophony. The soundtrack contributed prevalently to the sense of busyness, which was thematicized in the show. The narrative voice drew attention to this at the moment the last model exited when the strings stopped playing as he claimed, “There’s been too much going on. Can we move the house to a place where nothing ever happens? And things are slower. I’ll be happy there.” Much like the conclusion of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the track then switched to the soothing sounds of nature. The narrative voice then ended, and the natural sounds persisted as the models returned, marching in a close line. In this chilling finale of the show, the powerfully-clothed women made one last square around the house as each attendee applauded. The headphones blocked this sound out, however, instead playing the ethereal sounds of waves and birds chirping, crickets and wind.

Jacob’s critique of technologically-dispersed violence resembled, both thematically and because of the communicative power of the designers’ concepts, McQueen’s critique of the oppression of Scottish culture. Jacobs imbued his clothing with this conceptual meaning through military references, albeit forest-green and tan fabrics, large accessory buttons and pockets, or uniform appearances. The isolation of viewers through headphones, computerized directing soundtrack, doll-house set, and marching models heightened the conceptual meaning of Jacobs’ collection and made it clearer for viewers, extending the military references to critique a specific aspect of contemporary society.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to contribute to fashion's burgeoning recognition within academia as both an artistic medium and, primarily, a form of visual culture capable of communicating conceptual meaning—meaning which is made clearer during the runway performance. I began this study by describing the limited vantage point from which scholars have viewed fashion. This view interprets fashion merely for what it signifies about wealth, class, and status within Western culture. Largely because of this, scholarship has also denied designers the role of imbuing meaning, both cultural and conceptual, into the clothing they design.

Critically, this limited understanding of fashion's communicative ability pervades not just academia, but also bleeds into the fashion industry's understanding of itself. When fashion bloggers and critics publish their reviews of high-fashion runway shows, they are often merely recapitulations of the show itself, which assess the quality of both individual looks within the collection and the collection as a whole. These reviews focus nearly exclusively on the commercial potential of the clothing presented, and, when not, merely praise or denigrate the artistry, meaning the technical skill, of the designer.

A survey of reviews on leading web sites style.com and *Women's Wear Daily* confirms that none make a sustained effort to engage with these shows on a conceptual level. After evaluating the reviews on style.com, the premier fashion show review website, of five conceptual designer's collections from Spring/Summer 2016 Ready-to-Wear, I determined none of the reviews attempted to decode the meaning of the collections. The first paragraph of the review of Marc Jacobs' Spring 2016 collection, for instance, does identify two allusions made in the show—first, a Jeremiah

Goodman painting of former *Vogue* editor-in-chief Diana Vreeland's sitting room, and, second, the soundtrack taken from Darren Aronofsky's 2000 psychological drama film *Requiem for a Dream*. What the review completely excludes, however, is an interpretation of the meaning of these allusions within Jacobs' show. Instead, the critic merely says the allusions "screamed, 'I'm back!'" The review continues with quotes from Jacob that the writer collected backstage and finishes with a prediction that the designer's "floor-sweeping pleated skirts" might "make a comeback," before concluding it is "hard to say."⁶³

A hauntingly similar evasion of analysis pervades the review of designer Rei Kawakubo's Spring '16 collection for Comme des Garçons. Kawakubo, as the review acknowledges at its start, is the working designer with the highest reputation for conceptual designs: "The fashion community strives to keep believing that fashion can touch deeper meanings in this time of often bewildering industrial change, and [Kawakubo] is the one people turn to for some kind of emotional stimulus that goes beyond the blunt service of commerce."⁶⁴ The review describes Kawakubo's collection as "sculptural" and her models as "blue witches" before diverging on the growth of the brand "against all odds." The author describes the collection as "experimental," "extreme," and "conceptual," though she never details which concepts Kawakubo communicated through the clothing.

This evasion of analysis represents contemporary understanding of conceptual fashion. Reviewers acknowledge conceptual designers are doing something different from other designers in their clothing. The primary difference, reviewers comment, is that conceptual clothing is not as commercial. Critically, the reviews gloss over interpreting the show's dense, specific meaning by merely decrying the clothing as "experimental." Though fashion reviews recognize concepts in both the clothing and the runway show, historically they have not been interested in, or perhaps

⁶³ Nicole Phelps, "Spring 2016 Ready-to-Wear, Marc Jacobs, Sept. 25, 2015, *vogue.com*, accessed Oct. 25, 2015.

⁶⁴ Sarah Mower, "Spring 2016 Ready-to-Wear, Comme des Garçons," Oct. 3, 2015, *vogue.com*, accessed Oct. 25, 2015.

simply have lacked the framework, training, and inclination to name or consider which specific concepts are being communicated.

My goal in the preceding three chapters has been to lay out a framework with which to analyze conceptual fashion. This study has attempted to model an alternative approach to fashion analysis and review—one which takes into account the communicative structures of clothing itself, as well as the structures of the runway performance. Rather than merely interpreted conceptual fashion for its experimental nature, commercial value, or cultural signification (what the clothing communicates about wealth, status, gender, age, race, sexuality, nationality, and other factors of identity), conceptual fashion should be analyzed for the density of what the clothing communicates. This can be done using the framework of fabric, drape, and accessory. Additionally, instead of being dismissed as spectacle, the runway performance should be systematically analyzed using the framework of time, marketing, location, title, setting, set, soundtrack, and model appearance and behavior to understand how the runway show relates to and ultimately supports the conceptual meaning of the clothing within the collection presented.

A major intention of this work has been to contribute to the recognition of fashion as an artistic medium capable of communicating the same depth of meaning as literature, visual art, or music, and a medium that is unique among visual culture in our contemporary time period because of its close association with commerce. The two analyses in this work and the framework through which they interpret the conceptual meaning of clothing and runway performances are meant to illustrate new approaches for future fashion criticism and scholarship. Such analyses must become more common, or else we will be left, as we are now, with hundreds of shows fading into obsolescence, their dense meanings and social commentaries left unrecognized and unappreciated at the hands of merely commercial and cultural interpretations.

The two preceding analyses of Alexander McQueen's Autumn/Winter 1995 show "Highland Rape" and Marc Jacobs' Spring/Summer 2015 serve as examples of how fashion writers and critics might analyze the meaning of conceptual fashion. Unlike initial reviews, which asked

more questions than they provided answers for, or labeled the runway performance “fashion as theater,” which “distracts from seeing the clothes for what they are,” I suggest McQueen’s collection critiqued Scottish cultural appropriation within the British fashion industry of the early 90s.⁶⁵ Similarly, I argue that Jacobs’ show addressed the invasiveness of technologically-dispersed violence in contemporary Western society.

Moreover, this same methodology need not be limited to conceptual high fashion, but could also be applied to everyday and high-end commercial fashion, meaning fashion readily available in stores ranging from high-end department stores like Neiman Marcus to mass-market retailers like Forever21 or Topshop. The analysis of Marc Jacobs’ collection should serve as the foundation for furthering these types of analyses, as Jacobs has no distinct reputation for being a conceptual designer and his clothing is extremely wearable. Analysis of everyday clothing has become increasingly easy to do, as many mass-market retailers now have fashion shows which present their clothing in a narrative context. For instance, *vogue.com*’s fashion review of the Autumn/Winter 2013 collection by Topman, Topshop’s menswear line, described the parkas and drill pants as both “evoking vintage images of the gentleman explorer” and suggesting the “Shangri-la he might find when he reached his mountaintop.”⁶⁶ Clearly, the reviewer has latched on to a concept within the clothing—a story to which the collection alludes. With these very parkas starting at around \$60 and worldwide shipping, the clothing, and, in turn, the concept is accessible to most consumers.

In addition to the limit of excluding everyday fashion, this study has not distinguished between *prêt-à-porter*, or ready-to-wear, and haute couture, or high-fashion clothing. Additionally, only two conceptual collections were analyzed in this project, and no menswear collections were analyzed. Continuations of this study should consider designers like Hussein Chalayan, Ann Demeulemeester, Rei Kawakubo, and Issey Miyake, who have continually produced conceptual

⁶⁵ “Marc Jacobs Spring/Summer 2015 Ready-to-Wear,” *vogue.co.uk*, Sept. 11, 2014, accessed Jan. 7, 2016.

⁶⁶ Tim Blanks, “Fall 2013 Menswear Topman Design,” *vogue.com*, Jan. 6, 2013, accessed Jan. 7, 2016.

clothing and runway performances. Additionally, future analyses should include menswear shows, as these shows are capable of being equally as conceptual and are steadily becoming more experimental and notable within the fashion industry.

It is critical to acknowledge, though this dissertation has yet to focus on it, that wearers of clothing possess great agency in their ability to convey specific meaning through the clothing they wear—meaning that extends well beyond simply purchasing conceptual clothing. Clothing wearers rarely wear entire outfits from one designer, and this mixing of articles already imbued with meaning allows an outfit to be, much like McQueen’s re-appropriation of Scottish symbols, an example of Claude Levi-Strauss’s *bricolage*, or construction of unique meaning from the limited possibilities of pre-defined signifieds and signifiers.⁶⁷

Though this project has relied on the distinction between different kinds of fashion—high fashion and everyday fashion, and, primarily, conceptual and commercial fashion—the argument that arises through the analyses of McQueen and Jacobs is that these distinctions are more permeable than they seem. Every kind of fashion is capable of communicating conceptual meaning. Much like designers imbue meaning into their collections and those collections’ performances on the runway, fashion wearers imbue specific meaning into the clothing with which they adorn themselves. As with the neon fish shirt from my youth or McQueen’s tartan, clothing carries stories—recognized and unrecognized, intentional and unintentional—that are specific to cultures, groups, and individuals.

The fashion system is often described in terms which relegate consumers little agency—consider earlier discussions of fashion elite creating trends which slowly trickle down to lower class consumers—thus forming the idea that wearers do not choose their clothing, but their clothing is chosen for them. This study challenges that notion and should empower wearers of clothing to use their agency to communicate meaning, albeit political messages, conceptual meaning, or merely

⁶⁷ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 20.

their unique identities through the clothes they purchase, personalize, create, and wear. Ultimately, the wearer's body, like the model's body in a runway performance, allows the clothing to communicate, and without this body and the agency this body possesses, the clothing would be mute.

This project has insisted the designer plays an integral role in imbuing clothing with meaning. Ultimately, however, designers cannot control how individuals create and communicate meaning through the clothing they choose to wear. Wearers of clothing combine pieces, add accessories, personalize items, and attribute their own interpretations to the things they wear. While designers create runway performances that conceptually support their clothing's ability to communicate, the runway is a substitute for reality, and models are actors portraying individual purchasers. The true venue for the communication of meaning through clothing is not the runway; it is the street, the hallway, the office, and the sidewalk. The performance does not end when the lights fade after a fashion show and the soundtrack concludes and the patrons gather their things and exit; rather, this is the moment when the performance begins—the first utterances of the language of fashion.

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